

## Palauans and the Japanese Military Experience

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*Translated by Patrick Tellei*

I am grateful for the opportunity to share my experiences and the experiences of the twenty-eight other young Palauans who went to work with the Japanese during World War II.

I will begin by going back to the early days in grade school when we began in the morning by facing Japan and bowing down to the emperor. We were prepared to do that because we were told by the Japanese that Japan would be the dominant power in the Pacific. We were prepared to accept that. We were able to read and we listened to the news, too, but the literature and the news were all Japanese oriented, so we only heard things about Japan. While going to school we heard that Japan had won in Beijing and Nanking, and this reinforced our belief that Japan was strong. In fact, they held celebrations to mark the victories. Then, of course, after that we heard about the victory at Pearl Harbor and nothing else. This further strengthened our belief that Japan was the power to follow. We came to believe Japan because everyday in the news we heard not only about the victory at Pearl Harbor but also in other places like Malaysia, the Philippines, and other countries in the Pacific that fell to the Japanese. When the time came to recruit our people into the Japanese Navy and Army bound for Dutch New Guinea (Irian Jaya), we were prepared to go because we were told that they were going to build a second Japan. The military administration in Koror sent word to all the chiefs from Palau to recruit the strongest and most able-bodied men. The opportunity was there, so they decided to go with it.

When we twenty-nine arrived in New Guinea we heard that the Americans had landed in Wewak and in Guadalcanal. We were charged with the task of unloading fuel and bombs from the ship and transporting them to the airport. Some of the men that went with us got sick; and some decided to

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stay behind with the indigenous people of Irian Jaya. The rest of us got on a ship and went to different places.

I and some of the other Palauan men got on a Japanese ship on its way to Celebes (Sulawesi). Unfortunately, the bombs that we helped unload were seized by the Allied forces who captured the place and later were the same bombs that were used against the Japanese. In Celebes, the place we stayed in was bombed out; everything on the ground was just wiped out. So we moved to Borneo. Immediately after we left Borneo the American Air Force bombed our previous base. From there we moved to Singapore. There all the transport ships were lost and only the military ships were left. Then we came under the jurisdiction of the military ships.

Japanese ships equivalent to American cruisers, along with four destroyers, came to Singapore and transported all the people recruited from the islands to Japan. At Singapore our task had been to load thirty thousand bars of silver to be brought to Japan. When we left Singapore, American planes were already all over the place, but fortunately a typhoon developed and the task force decided to ride out the storm for three days to prevent the planes from attacking the ships. It was successful and avoided the planes, so we reached Taiwan. We then went to the port of Kure in Japan. Our task then as workers on the ship was to unload all the silver bars, to throw them into the bay. From Kure we went to Hiroshima and stayed for ten days. We were in Hiroshima on 2 August 1945. [The A-bomb was dropped on 6 August 1945.]

From Hiroshima we left with a task force of seven ships for Taiwan in order to defend it. Taiwan was the westernmost stepping-stone for the invasion of the motherland. On our way to Korea at night, American submarine forces found us; that night we saw two of the seven ships, the one immediately in front and the one right behind, cut in half. Each of the ships that was lost carried at least three thousand military personnel and civilians on their way to Taiwan. The trip normally takes three days, but it took us a week because at night we had to watch for Japanese submarines and during the day for American submarines and airplanes.

There were many people aboard the ship and we ran out of food. They were not prepared to accommodate everybody. At that point we made up our minds we were ready to die. When we reached Taiwan the bombardment started, so we had to leave port again. When we finally made it to land we had to be transported by trains.

From there we moved to Kaohsiung, one of the places in Taiwan. Then we moved to where the Japanese were. The day we arrived we put in machine-gun emplacements in preparation for the invasion. While we were defending the place we were told they were going to use the most

sophisticated anti-aircraft guns. Again it was "proven" to us that the Japanese were very advanced, because the first two planes that approached were shot down. The next day an American plane flew beyond the range of the anti-aircraft guns and then dropped either leaflets or some sort of metals that affected the guns. The guns couldn't work anymore. Right after the first plane came and dropped some of those things to block the guns, at least twenty planes came and bombed the place that we had worked so hard to put together.

At that point, we, the people who were recruited to work, started doubting the Japanese, because their best weapons were no match against the Americans. We stayed there. The Chinese forces came in and then the US 6th or 7th Fleet came in. That was the end of the war for us. All the Japanese soldiers were returned to their homeland. We stayed and were the last group to leave with the Japanese officers to go back.

After they took over the place the American forces asked us where we wanted to go. We told them we wanted to go back to Japan. When we got to Japan, they asked us where we wanted to go. We told them that we wanted to go back to Palau because that's where we were from. From Tokyo we went to three other cities and then to Saipan. Some of those who stayed behind went straight from there to Morotai and then to Palau, but we came later and then had to stop in Saipan. From Saipan we went to Guam for a while, and from Guam down to Peleliu; and from Peleliu we went to Koror, where we were from.

#### **Appendix: Audience Questions and Answers**

**Q** What kinds of contacts did you have with the indigenous people in that section of Irian Jaya?

**UT** There were about five hundred labor corps members from Bia Island or state who worked side by side with the Japanese.

**Q** Did the Japanese give you a special role as a supervisor, as somebody who knew the Japanese language, or did your group work the same as the Papuans?

**UT** We were assigned special roles to supervise the workers from those places: (1) because we spoke the language; (2) because we were recruited to work there; and (3) because we learned the indigenous language in those six months.

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Q What about the wages of this group from Palau? How did they compare with prewar wages and working conditions?

UT In Palau, when we were working building the communication station in Palau, we were paid 70 cents a day. But when we were recruited to work in the South Pacific we were paid the equivalent of \$1.50 a day.

Q I'd be interested in your impression of the Americans prior to having any contact with them, and then after. Being in a Japanese environment, what were your impressions of the Americans harming the soldiers?

UT Originally we were told that the Americans were not very good and that they would do two things. Either they would beat us, or those who committed serious crimes would be tied to horses and the horses would split them. We believed that before we met them. But after the Americans came in, and after the surrender, we learned that they were different people. When we were in Taiwan two navy officers walked up while I was sitting with a Japanese and asked me if I was Filipino. I said no, I was Micronesian. They told me that I belonged to Americans, and then took me to their ship and gave me American clothes.

Q After the war did the Japanese reward your group with any compensation?

UT No compensation. The money used was the money we were paid while in Taiwan. But after the war we didn't receive any compensation.

Q Your account just now sounds as if it wasn't until you got to Taiwan and the American planes were bombing that you began to have doubts. It seems as if you and your friends worked willingly, voluntarily, that you were fairly devoted to the image you had of Japan. Was there any time before Taiwan that you began to question or began to regret leaving Palau?

UT When we were still in Irian Jaya, that's when we started having doubts. But you couldn't make it show that you were having doubts. But from our contacts with the indigenous people there, some of whom had contact with the Allied forces, they told us that we were going to lose the war. And we started having doubts, but we wouldn't show it.